



Working Class Subjectivities and Neoliberalisation in Kyrgyzstan: Developing Alternative Moral Selves

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Abstract This article investigates the subjectivities of working class people in Kyrgyzstan, examining their boundary work produced in response to neoliberal changes. While working class people are depicted as unenterprising and ‘backward’ by the rich and the middle classes, they often react with anger and lament the colonisation of life by market values, usually invoking non-market norms and nostalgia for the Soviet era of labour, solidarity and equality. Most importantly, they draw upon alternative cultural resources and discourses, such as traditional morality and Islam, to develop alternative ‘caring’ and ‘pious’ selves, which dissociate wealth from moral worth and provide other sources of self-esteem. But these counter-values can also be problematic, as they are ineffective in countering market forces and hardening class divisions.

Keywords Working class subjectivities · Neoliberalism · Boundary work · Moral sentiments · Post-Soviet Central Asia

Introduction

‘When I die, I don’t want to be remembered as someone who was wealthy. I want to be remembered as someone who cared about his community, his country and did something useful for people,’ said Salijan, a 62-year-old ex-factory worker, when asked to describe the characteristics he valued in himself and others. When defining a person of value, Salijan drew a moral boundary against the rich, thereby opposing wealth and moral worth. This article investigates the subjectivities of working class people in Kyrgyzstan, examining their boundary work in a neoliberal context. The country provides an appropriate case, since two and half decades of neoliberalising policies has resulted in unprecedented levels of social stratification and stigmatisation of the working classes, who are struggling to achieve the new

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ideal of the capital-accruing, self-responsible individual. This article will examine how working class actors respond to new structures and discourses and perform boundary and dignity work to counter the neoliberal vision of human agency (see also Lamont 1992, 2000; Sayer 2005). It will contribute to the literature on post-Soviet subjectivities by examining how working class people draw upon cultural resources to develop alternative moral selves in the Central Asian context. Its overarching research question is how working class actors create a sense of dignity in a context where they struggle to achieve material well-being.

In the West, neoliberalism began promoting new criteria of self-worth in the 1970s, attaching value to the individual's capacity to consume and to prosper in competitive markets. Yurchak (2003, p. 75) notes that the neoliberal subject emerged gradually, 'as a result of a long, slow, and contested evolution of market practices.' In the post-Soviet space, the neoliberal discourse and policies emerged in the 1990s despite the absence of such long-standing market practices. This important difference offers a unique opportunity to understand post-Soviet responses to the neoliberal vision of human agency.

There is a growing literature on neoliberal self-formations in post-socialist Eastern Europe and Russia, which tends to focus on the discursive power of neoliberal governmentality and the new middle classes, who have re-invented themselves and have adapted to the neoliberal hegemony (Makovsky 2014; Matza 2012; Patino 2009; Yurchak 2003). Few scholars (such as Morris 2012; Schroder and Vonderau 2008) have so far examined the repercussions of the neoliberal reforms on working class subjectivities, and there is little on Central Asia. The article addresses this gap in the literature by examining the relationship between the moral dimensions of working class subjective experiences and neoliberalising reforms in Kyrgyzstan.

This article draws upon Lamont's (1992, 2000) theoretical approach to boundary work and Sayer's (2005, 2010) ideas on the moral dimension of class. Lamont's framework provides a useful way to understand how class position and cultural discourses shape subjectivities and how different classes draw moral, socio-economic and cultural boundaries to attain positive self-identity and to distance others. In her cross-cultural study on working class men in the USA and France, Lamont (2000) examines how they drew moral boundaries against middle class managers and professionals, believing them to lack personal integrity and sincerity. Unable to gain high income and professional success, working class men sought alternative sources of moral worth. For instance, American white working class men put a high value on traditional definitions of morality, such as the Protestant work ethic, family commitments and moral integrity, to deflect accusations of laziness and to dissociate wealth from moral worth. Kefalas (2003) shows that white working class actors in Chicago constantly worked on themselves (being neat), their houses (maintained immaculate houses and manicured lawns) and their community (grassroots activism) to display and affirm traditional morality. In contrast, Lamont (2000) argues that French working class men did not focus as much on their work ethic and individual responsibility but gave more attention to egalitarianism and solidarity, drawing upon a rich history and culture of politicised discourses of labour rights and resistance. Lamont (2000) maintains that American working class men were more culturally similar to their middle class counterparts than were the French working class men.

Sayer (2005) argues that in the context of class inequality, definitions of worth are informed by emotions (or sentiments). Morality derives not only from traditional norms and cultural discourses but also from emotions (such as pride, shame, fear, envy, compassion and resentment) that are central to the subjective experiences of class. Sayer (2005) argues that emotional responses are embodied evaluative judgements of practices, relationships and things that relate to human well-being. Although actors have the capacity for fellow-feeling and

occupy multiple positions in various social spheres, class inequalities tend to be powerful, shaping actors' class dispositions, feelings and evaluations across a range of social fields. Morris (2012) shows how Russian blue-collar workers felt angry and humiliated at being subjected to neoliberal production processes, prompting them to recall how the moral order of socialist industrial relations allowed them a degree of autonomy on the shop-floor and gave them some dignity. Skeggs (2011) examines how young English working class women felt anxiety and distress at being looked down on which motivated them to pursue respectability through care-work and motherhood. She also demonstrates how material conditions of precarity and insecurity can produce different dispositions towards work (such as a sense of being exploited rather than an ethic of aspiration, and a feeling of endurance rather than entitlement), sociality (for instance, just hanging around rather than investing in the future) and meanings to life (e.g. seeking affective ties rather than exchange values).

Sayer (2005) argues that in the context of structural inequality, the struggle for respect can produce mixed and inconsistent class judgements and dispositions (e.g. working class aspirations for social mobility and respectability and a rejection of such values). Lamont (2000) shows that American white working class men accused their African-American counterparts of being lazy and lacking a work ethic, despite experiencing the same economic and social insecurities. Patco (2009) reveals how impoverished Russian teachers pursued both material respectability and moral virtue (such as dignity and professionalism), simultaneously accommodating and resisting market forces. Sayer (2005) notes that such working class contradictions reflect the dichotomous pressures to better themselves and to refuse what is refused to them.

This article shows how working class people in Kyrgyzstan respond to the neoliberal pressures of self-development in complex ways. Although they find themselves having to accept the new rules of the game and pursue material security, many also reflect on and evaluate their everyday experiences in relation to human well-being (Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2012). Their evaluations are grounded in personal socio-economic experiences of insecurity and injustice created by neoliberalism-in-practice (Whyte and Wiegatz 2016). They can contest the neoliberal hegemony by developing alternative 'caring' and 'pious' selves, drawing upon traditional morality and multiple Islamic discourses to define themselves through non-market values. But their alternative routes to self-worth can also produce unintended consequences, such as gendered practices and social accommodation, which inhibit progressive solutions to social injustices. The moral boundaries they draw can generate a world of moral simplicities and harden divisions between social groups (Sayer 2005).

The article is divided into six sections. The first section will discuss the research design and methods. In the second section, I will briefly examine how the middle class neoliberal discourse views social change and working class people. The third section will explore how working class actors make sense of their own lives and of social change. In the fourth section, I will discuss the nature of working class sentiments and boundary work. The fifth section will examine how working class people develop alternative values and practices to defend their sense of equal worth. Finally, I will make some concluding remarks.

Research Design

Kyrgyzstan offers a unique location to explore social change. It is the only Central Asian country that has undertaken extensive neoliberalising reforms, resulting in land and

agricultural privatisation, deregulation, financialisation and liberalisation of its economy, a weakening of its welfare state, and an accession to the World Trade Organization (Sanghera 2016; Pelkmans 2005). Praised by international financial institutions for the pace of economic reforms, the government has carried out a vast range of donor-funded programmes that advanced the ideals and values of entrepreneurship, self-governance and self-help (Babajanian 2009). People in rural areas bore the brunt of economic restructuring (see Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004; Spoor 2004; Junisbai 2010; Steimann 2011). In 2012, 38 % of the population was classified as poor, of whom 75 % lived in rural areas and were predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz. Widespread poverty in rural areas has caused over one million people out of six million to migrate internally from rural areas to cities and abroad (Fryer et al. 2014). The new opportunity structures have primarily benefited the ‘top political and economic elite ...[who] were able to convert power over resource allocation into ownership of important assets’ (Dudwick et al. 2003, p. 22). Kyrgyzstan’s Gini coefficient of income inequality has doubled since independence, fluctuating between 0.41 and 0.45 from 1996 to 2009 (Mogilevsky and Omorova 2011). A recent IMF (Ostry et al. 2016, p. 38) report noted that social inequalities produced by neoliberal policies were underestimated in terms of their social and economic costs.

The speed of economic reform has arguably contributed to political instability (Satybaldieva 2015). The two political uprisings of 2005 and 2010 revealed deep social divisions and the economic discontent of working class people (Pelkmans 2005). The 2010 uprising served as a prelude to the ethnic violence in the south of the country, resulting in clashes between rural ethnic poor Kyrgyz and urban Uzbeks (Heathershaw and Gullette 2015).

This study draws upon 54 in-depth interviews, which I conducted in the city of Osh from March to May 2013. The city of Osh has undergone deindustrialisation after the collapse of the Soviet Union and has experienced a rise in retail and wholesale trade and an influx of rural migrants, causing social tensions and localised conflicts (Kaminski and Raballand 2009; Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2012). The interviewees were recruited through snowballing sampling. The semi-structured interviews consisted of two parts, lasting on average 1–1.5 h. The first part asked interviewees to recount their life history, describing their lives from their early upbringing and schooling to their current family and work situation, their key concerns and everyday experiences. The second part focused on understanding how individuals experienced socio-economic changes, and how such experiences affected their sense of worth and values. The interviewees were also asked to describe their feelings when they witnessed or experienced inequality, and to reflect on their emotional experiences and what a good life meant to them.

The interviewees were assigned social class using multi-dimensional criteria: social class upbringing (working or middle class parents based on their occupations), educational qualifications (school, college or university), occupation (unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled or professional), property (renting or home ownership) and economic situation (struggling to make ends meet or having a comfortable lifestyle). In addition, some interviewees defined themselves as belonging to a particular social class, sometimes using euphemisms such as ‘a simple worker’, and ‘an intellectual.’ The sample consisted of 40 working class people, of whom 21 can be characterised as impoverished working class (or precariat) because they had greater job and housing insecurity; 14 were middle class. Overall, the working class participants, who comprised former and current state employees and rural migrants, possessed a much lower volume of cultural, social and economic capital than their middle class counterparts. Among young and middle-aged working class individuals, only one had a university degree, completed through long distance learning, and the rest had college or

vocational training. There were seven retired working class participants who had university degrees and professional occupations, but their meagre pensions pushed them into the category of the impoverished working class. All middle class participants had university degrees, with ten occupying high status jobs and four owning businesses. In terms of gender composition, 25 women and 29 men participated in the research. The sample consisted of 38 ethnic majority Kyrgyz, 15 ethnic minority Uzbek and 1 ethnic minority Slav. There were 22 interviewees who were between 18 and 34 years old, 15 aged between 35 and 49 years old and 17 who were 50+ years old. In terms of education, 9 had high school diplomas, 23 had college or vocational training and 22 had university degrees. Interviewees came from a diverse occupational background, such as semi-employed, teachers, petty traders, civil servants, former engineers and factory workers, waiters, housewives, military personnel and seasonal farmers. The study is not meant to be representative of the country but rather offers insights into the moral dimensions of working class subjective experiences. While the sample consisted of both classes, gender and of different ethnic groups, the paper does not fully explore their implications due to space limitations.

All the interviews were digitally recorded, and the interviewees were assured about confidentiality and anonymity. The subsequent analysis was coded with the help of NVivo 10 software, using various labels, which emerged after reading the transcripts several times. Some labels, such as ‘market discourses’, ‘key concerns’, ‘everyday grievances’, ‘values’, ‘moral sentiments’, ‘reflection on good life’, ‘faith’ and ‘caring for others’, identified key themes shared across the transcripts. Other labels, including ‘justice’, ‘political activism’, ‘nostalgia’ and ‘self-interest’, were more evident in some transcripts than others.

The Neoliberal Discourse of the Self

In southern Kyrgyzstan, the neoliberal narrative of the self operates in the context where many working class people have little choice but to become ‘entrepreneurs’ (or self-employed), as major factories and industries collapsed after 1991 and cross-border trade became a key economic sector (Kaminski and Raballand 2009). Nazar,¹ a 22-year-old working class student notes how self-employment has become a major form of work, ‘Everybody is in the bazaar working as traders. There aren’t any factory jobs.’ Tereskinas (2009) concurs that the market system has de-throned the values of a socialist working-man and has introduced a new hero, the ‘entrepreneur.’

People are likely to have different experiences and engagements with neoliberal ideas, norms and values according to their social position and struggles in society (Lamont 2000; Sayer 2005). Yurchak (2003) shows that urban educated Russian men have largely internalised the neoliberal discourse and have committed themselves to a business mode of living which valorises self-centred, flexible and masculinised behaviour in all spheres of life, including the family. In Kyrgyzstan, the entrepreneurial ideal appeals to similar groups and opposes the previous Soviet ideology and traditional morality (e.g. ethnic customs and religious norms²). For instance, Rasul, a 32-year-old middle class businessman, notes how many of the working

¹ All names have been changed to guarantee anonymity.

² Traditional morality is a mixture of pre-Islamic shamanistic culture (shared with the indigenous people of Siberia and Mongolia) and ascetic Sufi Islam distinct to Central Asia (see Heyat 2004).

class Kyrgyz people lack the entrepreneurial ambition and instead have more collective dispositions, which he de-values:

I think we should strive towards wealth. But the Kyrgyz, we can't stand those who are successful. You know, when I worked in Russia, I really admired the Tajik diaspora. For instance, if a new Tajik migrant arrived, the Tajik diaspora welcomed him and all traders gave him some of their goods to sell. This was his starting capital. But we, the Kyrgyz, are the exact opposite. The Kyrgyz diaspora was made up of racketeers and they would target those who have become rich and take their wealth from them... Our diaspora kept a fund for those who got sick and had to be sent home in case of emergencies. This is cancerous for the Kyrgyz. We can't stand the rich. We need to fix ourselves.

Rasul's discourse of the entrepreneurial self sees the pursuit of profit as virtuous, and it draws a moral boundary against working class people, who are involved in a form of illegal distributive social justice (see also Kupatadze 2008). Rasul assigns moral worth to wealthy traders and depicts working class people as lacking worth and being deficient because they have not internalised the principles of market justice. In his study of social justice attitudes in Central Asia, Junisbai (2010) notes that 70 % of Kyrgyzstanis display high levels of support for redistribution. But Rasul believes that such attitudes and beliefs towards care and justice should be corrected by individualising economic prosperity.

In addition, the new middle classes problematise working class actors for having a 'Soviet mentality' of state dependency, which inhibits individual responsibility, entrepreneurial spirit and creativity. Consider how Emil, a 33-year-old middle class regional director of a micro-credit finance company, explains poverty as a failure to break away from the Soviet habitus:

Those who are failing now are those who still live mentally in the Soviet system. Those who have realised that those days are gone, are moving ahead. They are the ones driving good cars, building two storey houses and having grand feasts. . . Frankly speaking, in Kyrgyzstan every individual has a chance to become rich. Look at all the rich. The rich are constantly doing something to enhance their wealth. We have the opportunity to work in markets. We are one of the most open countries. The poor are lazy! They are the ones who couldn't shake off the Soviet habits.

Emil notes that there are new opportunities for wealth, though the working class and the poor do not seize them because of their Soviet habits of welfare dependency. Emil criticises working class people for not having an entrepreneurial mindset. His discourse of enterprise explains social inequalities as due to personal failings, in that the market rewards people who possess the appropriate talents and skills, and punishes those who lack them.

Lamont (1992) argues that economic and moral boundaries separate people into groups and are often used to normalise and reinforce inequality. Both Rasul and Emil distance themselves from working class groups by creating moral and social boundaries that valorise economic success and individualise poverty as a moral failing. Sayer (2005) notes that the power to shame and legitimate advantages is disproportionately concentrated in the dominant social group. Junisbai's (2010) study shows that in Kyrgyzstan, educated urban residents with a high household income are associated with less egalitarian beliefs. The de-valuing of working class actors has become commonplace, especially in cities and major towns. Sometimes middle class actors' beliefs verge on social Darwinism, believing that the impoverished working class, especially poor rural migrants, are unfit to live in a civilised society, and should return to their villages, rather than blighting the urban landscape. The urban middle class pathologise them as

uncultured, vulgar and barbaric (in Kyrgyz *myrki*), and blame them for crime and disorder in the city (see also Flynn and Kosmarskaya 2012). Wiegratz and Cesnulyte (2015) argue that in highly unequal societies where money is the key to securing life's basic necessities, it can become a chief signifier of power and respect. But as we shall see, working class groups can construct alternative understandings of worth and the self.

Working Class Understandings of Social Change

In this study, working class people largely comprise former state employees and rural migrants, most of whom inhabit a precarious world, lacking adequate income to meet their needs beyond basic food necessities. They often contest claims that they are backward and unambitious and lack self-responsibility, explaining the structural reasons for inequality, and ridiculing the claim that the economic system presents everyone with equal opportunities to succeed. Their everyday life experiences and access to valuable resources are shaped by structural inequalities, which cannot be easily overcome. Anara, a 26-year-old working class single mother and a seasonal migrant worker, discusses the extent of social inequality:

Equal opportunities don't exist. Listen, today a child's life is determined even before he's born. It depends on things like if his mother can afford medical tests, pre-natal care, and good nutrition. Those who wish to have healthy children choose private clinics, which are 20 times more expensive. So inequality, this division between the haves and have-nots, begins at the embryonic level! This is how it is. We're witnessing these injustices daily. The state has much responsibility to bear, of course. You know, what we have now is a severe capitalist system.

Anara criticises the idea that the country has a fair and just economic system, and suggests that people's lives are profoundly and arbitrarily affected by the lottery of birth and parents' class positions. She also identifies the state's incapacity to ameliorate the effects of market inequalities. Babajanian (2009) notes that in 2008 the government, guided by the international donor community, passed legislation to raise the income threshold for social assistance, thereby further impoverishing working class families. There are inadequate institutional safeguards to protect working class people from market volatility and injustices. Junisbai (2010) notes that a majority of the country shares Anara's perception that luck and inequality, and not meritocracy, shape people's life chances.

In the study, some working class actors are particularly upset that state institutions have become marketised, contributing to their misery and suffering (see also Engvall 2013). They often have to wait up to several days at multiple state offices to apply for legal documents, to receive medical treatment and to register for scarce childcare and housing provisions. Far from being a rational and fair system, waiting halls are markers of people's power, wealth and self-worth (see also Auyero 2011). State officials belittle those waiting, who cannot pay a bribe to access state goods and services faster. Esen, a 34-year-old working class rural migrant from Karasu region, recalls the treatment he received at the hands of a high-ranking state official:

I applied for my passport in 2003. I've struggled to get my passport. The woman who was the head of passport department treated me with so much disdain. She issued my passport but refused to give it to me until I paid her a bribe. I was only able to get my passport in 2008. She hid my passport in her office for 5 years! Whenever I came to claim it, she told me to wait. She humiliated me, wiped her feet on me...only after 5 years, I got my passport from her.

Compare his experience to that of Bakyt, a 40-year-old middle class businessman:

I lost my passport three times and I was able to renew my passport easily on all three occasions. I'll be honest, I got my passport through connections. It was quick and easy. It took couple of weeks not even a month!

Lacking significant social and economic capital, many impoverished working class actors like Esen are unable to enjoy their basic rights, while most middle class individuals gain from state corruption. Corrupt officials discriminate against working class groups, reinforcing the symbolic power of the market. McMann (2009) argues that in Central Asia market reforms have increased state corruption, because government officials can seek rent and bribes from those seeking scarce state goods and services.

Although most working class participants in the study are able to critically reflect upon their own experiences, there are some who normalise inequalities and aspire towards wealth (see Sayer 2005). The participants who accept and accommodate themselves to the social inequalities are often young and lack education and social networks. Dina, a 19-year-old working class waitress, dropped out of college and struggles to make sense of her situation: 'I feel that we should not be like this [divided into poor and rich]. But I just accept it. I don't fully understand why things are the way they are.' Even though Dina struggles to understand, she intuitively feels that the system is not fair. Despite this, Dina dreams of material security and prosperity and believes that perseverance and luck can overcome social inequalities.

Given how people can both accommodate to and resist their social surroundings, it is not surprising that some working class people in the study present inconsistent and confusing evaluations of social inequalities (see Sayer 2005). Aidar, a 28-year-old working class self-employed builder, first de-politicises social inequalities, believing that individuals have the means to shape their own lives: 'Poor people bring poverty upon themselves. I believe this 100%. We can choose whether we can be wealthy or poor. And we can't just sit here and be jealous of the rich.' But then he discusses his housing needs, and how his family is often forced to move from one rented accommodation to another. Despite years of queuing for housing, the local government is unable to allocate him a land plot, leading Aidar to reverse his beliefs: 'But one man can do little to solve his life problems. It just doesn't work like that. If all problems could be solved through sheer will power, then I would have resolved mine a long time go.' The housing market is one of the most visible forms of social inequalities, as the state lacks funds to build social housing and private developers mainly cater to the wealthy (Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2012). For some working class people, waiting for housing is a long, humiliating and frustrating process.³ Azamat, a 30-year-old working class army soldier, recounts his experience of waiting and his lack of hope: 'I applied for land to build a house and my number was 217 and in a year it became 289. I was pushed further back by those who paid money to get ahead of me.' State institutions discipline working class actors to operate in the new neoliberalising order through innumerable acts of waiting that make them feel worthless to claim their rights (see also Auyero 2011). At waiting halls for state benefits, many working class people experience inequality and injustice, in addition to those generated by the market.

³ In Osh, over 63,000 people have been waiting for housing, many of them since the late 1980s.

Working Class Moral Sentiments and Boundary Work

Some scholars (such as Klumbyte 2008; Ost 2005; Mandel and Humphrey 2002) argue that working class individuals respond with a mixture of fear, anger, pride and nostalgia to the everyday experiences of the neoliberalising regime. Their anger is visible when they protest, blockade roads and attack foreign corporations. The mass media and policy-makers often misread their negative sentiments, branding them as ‘thugs’ or ‘mobs’. Most upper and middle class actors tend to dismiss working class emotions as impulsive and thoughtless. But Sayer (2005) argues that emotions should be taken seriously because they provide highly sensitive evaluative judgments of things that matter to people’s well-being. Emotions also have a normative structure that can shape people’s moral understanding of their circumstances (Sayer 2005; Nussbaum 2001). For instance, Ngai (2007) and Ost (2005) argue that negative emotive reactions, such as anger and jealousy, can be expressions of social and economic injustices and a desire for a fairer society. In the study, many working class people feel angry when market criteria of worth undermine traditional ones. Mirbek, a 40-year-old working class taxi driver, describes his indignation at a recent alumni reunion when an ethnic Kyrgyz custom of honour and respect was disregarded by a wealthy powerful person:

We recently celebrated 20th anniversary of school graduation. One of my classmates is a rich state official. We booked a restaurant. You see, the Kyrgyz tradition seats *aksakals* [male elderly persons] at the most prominent spot at the table and they get the best parts of sheep meat. Respect is given according to one’s age and years of experience. And at our gathering, my rich classmate, who is younger than me, came in late. As he walks in, everybody gets up and they start saying, ‘Oh, the boss is here, please sit here [at a prominent place]’. And when the sheep’s head was brought in, we gave it to the oldest person in the room. But he felt inferior because he was poor and gave it to my rich classmate, saying ‘No, the boss should have it.’ I was livid! My rich classmate just kept the sheep head. He should have returned it, saying ‘No, it’s not right, the *aksakal* should get it.’ But he was so used to getting such special treatment that he felt entitled to it.

Traditions of honour and respect were altered to favour the rich official, causing Mirbek to react with horror as the events unfolded at the reunion. Many in the room flattered and ingratiated themselves with him in the hope of benefiting from his patronage. Mirbek was indignant that he and his fellow classmates acted in a deferential manner, and failed to uphold traditional customs. For Aristotle, anger can be a necessary defensive reaction to important beliefs and commitments, and failing to be angry can be equated to being a slave (Nussbaum 1994). Mirbek’s anger shows how wealth can distort social relationships and practices and their associated values and beliefs (see Sanghera and Iliasov 2008; Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2009). The classmates at Mirbek’s alumni reunion were more interested in comparing and evaluating their status and power than socialising and being friendly.

Lamont (2000) notes that economic inequalities and market criteria of worth can be disabling for working class people. They come to be defined as ‘losers’, making them feel stigmatised and disrespected. For instance, several teachers in the study feel humiliated that the moral dominance of money degraded their work and worth, treating them according to a lower mode of valuation than is appropriate to them (see also Sandel 2012). Consider how Tolon, a 61-year-old working class teacher, conveys his shame at how his profession fails to receive proper recognition:

Once I overheard a conversation among young businessmen. One of them said: “I have never seen a teacher who dresses and eats well. All teachers are dirt poor. They never drive a car, never sit in a restaurant or café, relaxing. They lead an inferior life.” His ridicule was followed by his friends’ laughter. It devastated me. Their talk played on my mind. I kept asking myself: “How is it that teachers became an object of ridicule by the *nouveau riche*?” ... Later, at a regional conference on education, I got a chance to speak out against them. I said: “We always praise business sponsors for their one-off donations to schools. But the real sponsors are the teachers who agreed to work for a miserable salary. They are the ones who gift their time and hard work worth thousands of dollars to our children. Today teachers have not received a just reward and recognition for their work from society.”

Although the businessmen’s ridicule aims to express superiority, Tolon denounces it by attributing value and recognition to the teachers, arguing that they make a more meaningful contribution to society. He is critical of the rich for failing to recognise the teachers’ praiseworthy practices. Skeggs (2011) notes that class relations are not only about struggles over economic resources but also over the different understandings of value. Lamont (2000) notes that working class people often draw moral boundaries that express sources of worth and dignity other than wealth and income.

Mandel and Humphrey (2002) note that older working class people, who studied and worked in the former Soviet Union, often expressed their resentment at the new moral economy, lamenting the weakening of social solidarity and being nostalgic for the Soviet productive labour. Klumbyte (2008) argues that nostalgia is not simply a longing for stability and security but also a normative response to the neoliberalising cultural political economy of disempowerment and inequality. In contrast to nostalgia in Eastern European contexts, where it lacks political valence and can even be a tool for furthering the neoliberal project (see Todorova and Gille 2010), nostalgia in the former Soviet Union presents a restorative moral discourse about the dignity of the working class, social equality and an alternative vision to human flourishing. Consider how Akinai, a 55-year-old working class pensioner, reclaims pride and recognition by recalling the Soviet past:

Our textile factory was the second largest in Central Asia. I was educated as an engineer specifically for our factory. When I started working at the factory, I was given a room in dormitory straight away. Back then, these dorms were very clean, comfortable and nicely furnished. . . . We used to make beautiful, high quality fabrics of many different kinds. Now, we lost all of that. Today, our cotton is exported as a raw material to Russia, Turkey and China and then we buy from them clothes at really high prices. It’s very painful for me to talk about this. I gave my life to this factory and it just got destroyed.

Akinai articulates a sense of pride of being part of a large workers’ collective. She identifies with the Soviet system that did not discard workers as cheap labour, but provided them support, social security and training. Her account is critical of the market system, which has destroyed the region’s productive manufacturing sector, reducing it to a mere exporter of raw materials.

Several scholars (such as Mandel and Humphreys 2002; Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2009) point out how working class people in the former Soviet Union often criticise actual markets for being parasitic on production and a form of speculation and profiteering. Sultan, a 24-year-old working class communication operator, notes that bazaars attract unproductive speculators:

Our ‘businessmen’ are just re-sellers. I call them *chaikuchu* [speculators]. They don’t produce anything. They just get goods from China and then re-sell them by adding more. They make money like that and this kind of labour has no virtue.

Sultan condemns the market system that celebrates buying and selling as useful activities, but fails to value productive labour. Speculative trade largely benefits a few market owners and stifles manufacturing growth and innovation (Sanghera 2016; see also Sayer 2015). Increasingly, some ethnic Kyrgyz working class actors have criticised markets in nationalist and racist terms, wrongly holding other ethnic groups responsible for social problems. Drawing upon ethnonationalist discourse, they accuse ethnic Uzbek businesspeople of creating wealth through dishonest and speculative trade, feeling some hatred, bitterness and envy towards them. They maintain that ethnic Kyrgyz do not have ‘trade in their blood’ in the way ethnic Uzbek do. In part, they rationalise their racist feelings, arguing that ethnic Kyrgyz culture is more suited to productive work, such as animal husbandry. As Sayer (2005) notes, racist feelings are likely to co-exist with moral sentiments because people can have fallible understandings of social inequalities.

In the research, some working class actors contrast the current inter-ethnic social relations to those during the Soviet period when they were more egalitarian. Salijan laments the loss of communal relationships:

I want relations to be like during the Soviet period. I remember I used to get back home late from work and see lights still on in my neighbours’ homes. And I would just go to them, Kyrgyz or Russian, it didn’t matter, and we would just have a meal together and chat. We used to celebrate all the holidays and birthdays together. Now we’re too divided.

Salijan fondly recalls the time when there was greater camaraderie. Kuehnast and Dudwick (2004) argue that social networks in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan are also economically segregated, with rich households largely interacting with other rich households and excluding poor relations from their social circles. Whereas some working class interviewees view the Soviet era with nostalgia, most middle class participants, such as Rasul and Emil, criticise Soviet-style thinking and practices as ‘backward’. But as Sayer (2005) notes, working class sentiments, such as anger, resentment, pride, justice and longing, are not irrational reactions, but intelligent and discriminating responses to things that matter to their sense of worth. Working class people do not merely strategise and accommodate themselves to their social surroundings but evaluate them in terms of well-being. They do not just want to become accomplished actors in playing the neoliberal game, but want a different world.

Working Class Alternative Moral Selves

In the study, some working class participants resist the neoliberal discourse by developing alternative caring and pious selves, which are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap in everyday life. But the alternative selves are distinct in how they view social change and the source of virtue. The caring self is other-oriented and sees social change as possible by cultivating a sense of fellow-feeling and care for others. The pious self is more introspective and links social change to individual moral renewal through balanced living, spiritual purification and asceticism. In developing alternative selves, working class people can face

problems and dilemmas. The alternative selves allow some working class actors to draw moral boundaries against the upper and middle classes, who are viewed as being selfish and corrupt.

The Caring Self

Most working class actors resent being labelled as poor and try to avoid defining themselves solely according to an economic criterion. They usually define themselves in relation to familial and communal ties and roles, as caring mothers, fathers and husbands and neighbours (see Lamont 2000; Skeggs 2011). A good life and a person of value are constituted by attachments and concerns, possessing moral sentiments that are other-oriented (such as compassion and altruism), and fostering caring relationships with family members and neighbours (see also Sanghera et al. 2011). Through care and loyalty, many working class people develop a positive sense of self-worth and place themselves above the people they resent (Lamont 2000; Skeggs 2011). Their caring selves are viewed as being superior to people who do not put community ahead of themselves and who show off their wealth rather than help people in need.

Sayer (2011) notes that human flourishing requires cultivation and practice of virtuous actions, such as generosity, care, love and solidarity, though they can also be gendered with women usually undertaking a greater share of care responsibilities than men. Sandel (2012) likens such virtues to muscles that grow stronger with exercise. In the study, some working class actors discuss the importance of having sympathy and cultivating care for others, as Salijan notes:

We'll sort out our problems only if we care about each other. If we don't feel each other's pains and needs, nothing will change. It requires great discipline and self-monitoring to put others first. If we work on building good relations with neighbors, brothers and sisters in our families, then the bigger environment will transform.

Salijan describes the aspirational aspect of virtues, things that people ought to do. He notes that virtues are not always enacted, but through self-monitoring and discipline, people can realise them. Yulduz, a 55-year-old working class teacher, shares her garden produce with her neighbours because she 'cannot enjoy her food if they are starving.' Shirin, a 53-year-old former working class civil servant, describes how caring responsibilities are cultivated at home and begin with those closest to her and extend outwards: 'Moral education starts at home. Home is like a small state. Here we learn to care for children, relatives, neighbours and other citizens.' But Sanghera et al. (2011) note that care responsibilities are often gendered and can be damaging to carers and those cared for. In Kyrgyzstan, childcare can be problematic because mothers are often forced to migrate to the city or overseas in order to find worthwhile employment, which means being away from home for several years and leaving their children in the care of their grandparents because fathers are also absent working away from home. Almost a million migrants work in Russia and Kazakhstan, posing a considerable burden on frail grandparents who struggle to raise several children on a meagre income. Migrant mothers feel guilty about leaving their children behind, and the children feel distressed about being abandoned.

Traditional moral norms and role models can also be aspirational in shaping working class subjectivities. For instance, Anara maintains the traditional norm of hospitality but is ashamed to be only able to offer tea and bread to her guests. Akinai describes how she offers her seat on the bus to very elderly people or pregnant women. Moreover, while *aksakals* (male elderly

persons) have lost much of their social status and symbolic authority to wealthy elites, as Mirbek noted, many working class people in the study continue to respect *aksakals*, teaching their children that they, and not the rich, are exemplary role models. Salijan believes that *aksakals* are important in maintaining moral order:

I wish they would show *aksakals* on TV more often, picking up litter and shaming people. Such role models are more important than those in Parliament! They are our moral compasses. Without these role models we'll become totally lost. It will be complete chaos.

Salijan sees *aksakals* as symbolising a caring civic community that offers alternative values to those represented by markets and elites. Although care relationships are increasingly difficult in a competitive economic environment, many working class actors in the study still try to enact the moral norms of care, hospitality and respect. Such norms allow them to draw a moral boundary between themselves and middle class and rich households.

The Pious Self

Historically, most Kyrgyzstanis adhered to traditional Islam, which 'incorporates many elements of pre-Islamic religions and cults, including shamanism, animism, Zoroastrianism, ancestor worship and the cult of nature' (Heyat 2004, p. 277). Recent ethnographic work on Islam in Central Asia shows how people construct moral Muslim selfhoods through their engagement with sacred spaces, imaginary encounters with spirit agents and disciplined observance of religious duties (Rasanayagam 2006; Louw 2013). But while the increase in pious practices can be seen as a search for cultural authenticity, arguably, in the absence of class politics, some working class actors can draw upon Islam to counter market values by constructing a pious self. As Lamont (2000) and Sayer (2005) note, individuals draw upon existing cultural resources and discourses to understand how they ought to live. The pious self can offer more resilience to social ills and inequalities. In the study, several young working class men express a sense of self-worth and purpose after they began practising Islam. Talaj, a 27-year-old working class petty trader in Karasuu market, who regularly participates in *davat* (spreading the word of Islam), believes that he has a mission to make people's lives better: 'We spend days with [alcoholic people] and teach them to practise *namaz* (daily prayers). We're trying to purify people, to awaken their spirits. *Davat* calls for people to be virtuous.' Talaj abstains from harmful substances and worldly pleasures and teaches others to do so. People who follow ascetic Islamic practices are often regarded as being trustworthy and virtuous, and gain respect and recognition from family and community members.

At the heart of asceticism in Islam is the rejection of excessive materialism and consumerism and an obligation to pursue a balanced and harmonious existence. Ravshan, a 58-year-old working class cook, draws upon the Koran to advocate moderation and social support:

In the Koran it says that we should be in the middle. It says don't be on the margins and don't get up too high either. This life is just a test. That's why I'm not interested in wealth. Wealth is your biggest enemy! Fights and scandals arise from wealth. Wealth blinds us. . . . Wealth should be distributed, that's its true purpose. It should be used to

build children's playgrounds, good care facilities and orphanages. Those who are rich will go to heaven only if they have shared their wealth and helped the poor.

Ravshan believes that wealth has an instrumental value to meet societal needs and care responsibilities. Whereas neoliberal individuals typically value their ability to accumulate money as an end in itself, Ravshan views money as means to an end. He warns of the dangers of wealth, its distorting effects on people and reality (see also Sayer 2005).

In the study, some working class actors draw upon Islam to criticise the marketised public sphere and state corruption. Rahat, a 59-year-old working class kindergarten teacher, believes state officials can learn from the Koran:

My father taught me Islamic values. I now understand why he was such a devout Muslim and the reason he wanted us to study the Koran so much. It's because these values teach us not to value wealth. You know today many state officials have Iskhak Razzakov's⁴ saying posted in their offices: 'If I'm honest and you're honest, then the whole community will be honest.' But I think they should post this line from the Koran instead: 'You can't take your wealth to the other world.' Death is a great equaliser. Once you're dead, it doesn't matter what your status is. What matters is how morally good your life was!

Rahat picks out a Koranic saying that de-legitimises wealth accumulation and emphasises human equality, because death strips people of their worldly possessions. Rahat believes that if state officials remembered this, they could develop a proper perspective on life. Rahat's view on wealth corresponds with recent studies that show that income beyond a 'bliss point' does not enhance well-being and can actually reduce it (Dorling 2014). Heyat (2004) notes that despite encouraging veiling, many working class women in Kyrgyzstan embrace orthodox Islam because of its moral and economic egalitarian message.

In addition, some working class actors draw upon Islam to criticise trade and markets as corrupting influences on society because such economic practices can encourage lying, cheating, short-selling and other forms of illegal activities. They describe markets as a ruthless world, where people need to be aggressive and dishonest to succeed. Talaj finds his own occupation as a petty trader undesirable, but unavoidable because he has so few options. While other traders are seen as corrupt, he remains pious:

I read the Koran a lot and I don't chase material wealth. In Islam it's prohibited to give bribes. In bazaar most people don't apply for licenses and pay bribes. Many cheat their customers to make money. Or they really push their products onto them. I don't do that. I don't want to lie or manipulate people because of money. I don't want to abandon God chasing wealth. It's wrong to be too rich.

Talaj's pious identity helps him to resist enrichment and manipulation of others. His identity disciplines him against the temptation. He envisages an alternative moral economy that controls wealth, speculation and finance, subscribing to Islamic principles of moderation and spirituality. Religious values guide and motivate people to operate in alternative ways. They enable some working class people to draw a moral boundary against the successful business class. Most working class people are reflexive about their lives, and some attempt to lead a virtuous life, cultivating dispositions to be caring and spiritual (see Lamont 2000; Skeggs 2011; Mahmood 2003).

⁴ Iskhak Razzakov was a prominent state leader, who served as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kirgizia from 1950 to 1961.

Conclusion

This article has examined the moral dimensions of working class subjectivities in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan in the context of neoliberal pressures to reform the self. While working class people are depicted as unenterprising and ‘backward’ by rich elites and the middle classes, they reject the neoliberal discourse that de-politicises social inequalities. They often react with anger and lament over the colonisation of life by economic values, usually invoking non-market norms and nostalgia for the Soviet era of labour, solidarity and equality. Most importantly, they draw upon alternative cultural resources and discourses to develop alternative caring and pious selves through everyday acts of sympathy, care, religiosity and economic moderation. Scholars (such as Lamont 2000; Kefalas 2003; Skeggs 2011) show that working class people can counter the denial of equal moral worth and recognition by engaging in identity management. In so doing, working class actors draw moral boundaries against neoliberal subjects, who are depicted as being selfish and corrupt.

Some readers may suggest that working class people are making a virtue out of a necessity, disguising their lack of material success behind a caring demeanour or a pious cloak. But such an interpretation is overly cynical and dismisses lay people’s capacity for evaluation (Sayer 2005). What emerges strongly from the interviews with working class people is that care, equality, productive labour, solidarity and economic moderation are at the heart of their definition of a good life. Individuals are evaluative beings, who deliberate on what things are of importance to their and others’ well-being. Future studies on emerging economies require attention to lay morality as well as power relationships, without reducing the former to the latter. In addition, future research in the region can explore how working class subjectivities intertwine with gender, ethnicity and age; this may help understand political action.

Sayer (2005) notes that working class responses to neoliberalisation can be confusing and inconsistent. Their moral boundaries can generate a world of moral simplicities and harden divisions between social groups. Available cultural and religious discourses used as sources for positive self-identification can also foster social accommodation and conservative values (such as the acceptance of poverty and gender inequality) that fail to tackle class domination and inequalities. Working class subjectivities of care and piety do not necessarily cultivate class consciousness, resist neoliberalism or bring about social justice. Their outcomes are uncertain and contingent. For instance, while the pious self can disapprove of contentious politics, advocating patience, moderation and other-worldliness, it can also encourage a different set of moral economic practices, such as financial institutions that subscribe to less exploitative Islamic principles of finance and banking. And while the caring self can respond to exclusion and denial of dignity with anger and shame, engaging in political protests to protect social well-being, it can also be limited to expressing immediate grievances rather than to mobilising around structural problems.

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Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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